

# MAPPING COMMEMORATIVE CULTURES, BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

## CASE STUDY: Haiti

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For this project we considered February 7th because for five years it was considered significant until that significance slowly faded into obscurity. The Duvalier dictatorship officially ended with the exile of the dictator on February 7th, 1986 and Haiti's first democratic election was held in December 1991 and President Jean Bertrand Aristide came into power on February 7th, 1991. The date was specifically chosen to mark the transition to democracy in the aftermath of 29 years of dictatorship and five years of violent military rule. Every February 7th since has been marred by the repeated violence preceding an election, the inaccessibility of voting stations, and the disappointment in the misapplication of democracy.

We selected April 26th because that is the most known massacre under the dictatorship and, because of our advocacy in 2014, it is the only official date to commemorate crimes committed during that period of our history. The presidential decree that made the date an official day of remembrance didn't call it a day of remembrance for victims of the dictatorship but stated that it was the "National Day of Remembrance of Victims of Fort-Dimanche", the notorious state prison and instrument of terror during the dictatorship. The decree called for flags to be at half-mast and "invited" media, schools, families, the private and public sectors, and civil society organizations to "mark the occasion". It neither acknowledges the crimes of the dictatorship nor does it actually make the state responsible for anything on the occasion.

## 1. Background Describing the Period of Violence Examined

In 1957, François ‘Papa Doc’ Duvalier ascended the presidency of Haiti and revised the constitution to allow himself to be declared ‘President for life’ in 1964. The vote for this occasion was uncontested as all ballots had already been filled out ‘Yes’ before voters could use them.<sup>1</sup> In 1971, Duvalier died and was succeeded by his son Jean-Claude, who held office until his ousting in 1986. The 30-year reign of the Duvalier family was characterized by strategic massacres to remove political, social, and economic obstacles, corruption, and embezzlement. Most of the massacres targeted the rural peasantry resulting in thousands of deaths and paving the way for international companies to set up shop and exploit the people whose lands they had appropriated.

The current context in Haiti is the result of the legacies of the dictatorship which set a new precedent for how Haitian presidents would serve the agenda of international actors, namely the United States of America (U.S.). Every leader from the de-facto military leader Raoul Cedras to the democratically elected populist leader Aristide, all the way to Martelly and all the interim presidents in between were strongly supported by the U.S. government. Whatever we can say about the successive violent eras that we have been subject to and our own contributions to those circumstances we must not minimize the continuous influence and impact of the international community on our internal politics.

## 2. Official Participation in Commemorations

On January 12, 2010, Haiti was hit by a 7.0 earthquake that killed over 300,000 people. In the aftermath of clearing the rubble and collecting and removing corpses, a mass grave was dug outside of the capital to bury all the victims. Three years later, the new administration held a memorial at the site of the destroyed national palace. In 2015, they built a monument at the site of the mass grave and held a public commemoration where flowers were placed at the monument. And finally, in 2018, the new president hosted another commemoration at the national palace. Commemorations are at best sporadic.

For Devoir de Mémoire-Haïti (DDMH), the closest instances of official participation in commemorations linked to the dictatorship are as follows:

1. Our 2013 commemoration was attended by former President René Préal who attended by himself without any security or fanfare that a former President is provided.

### THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE FOR JUSTICE, TRUTH, AND RECONCILIATION

In 2014, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) launched the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth & Reconciliation (GIJTR), a consortium of nine international organizations focused on offering holistic, integrative, and multidisciplinary approaches to issues of truth, justice, and reconciliation. GIJTR works primarily with local populations, civil society organizations, survivors, and governments to develop transitional justice approaches that are victim-centered and collaborative and support dignity, respect, inclusion, and transparency in societies emerging from conflict or periods of authoritarian rule. Since its founding, GIJTR has engaged with people from 72 countries, worked with 681 civil society organizations, conducted 323 community-driven projects, and documented more than 5,040 human rights violations.

For more information, please visit [gijtr.org](http://gijtr.org).



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2. In 2022, DDMH was approached by the Office of the Ombudsman to ask about commemorating April 26th, 2022 and doing a series of events on the dictatorship in anticipation of the 60th anniversary of the massacre in 2023. Following the meeting they released a press note saying that the government should respect the occasion. We have not heard from them since.
3. DDMH has received authorization from the Pétion-Ville and Port-au-Prince Mayor's office to hang banners and produce several graffiti installations on public streets.

### THE PUBLIC NARRATIVE REGARDING STATE-SPONSORED VIOLENCE

It is unrealistic at this point in time to expect the Haitian government to take responsibility for or even acknowledge anything that happened in 2020 let alone events from 30-60 years ago. Haiti was under military regime between 1991 and 1994 and the return of the democratic leader Aristide prompted a truth and justice commission that gathered testimonies and evidence of systematic human rights violations, particularly torture. In 1994, the Haitian military and their paramilitary forces attacked a pro-Aristide neighborhood leaving many wounded and bodies in the street. They forbade people from collecting the bodies and so an official count of the casualties was never confirmed but estimated at about 30 people. In 2000, over 50 people were tried for the attack and 37 sentenced to prison, though only 16 were convicted, the rest were sentenced in absentia. This was the first instance in Haitian history of a transitional justice process, but less than 5 years later, the sentences were overturned. It has long been understood that to occupy an official post, no matter how menial, affords one a certain authority. Naturally, those in actual positions of influence, such as judges, are systematically abusing their power by dismissing cases and completely ignoring not just the rule of law but all the international conventions that Haiti has signed.

The Haitian government proceeds in full impunity for its own crimes but also in violation of international treaties because it is very easy to do so when there is little evidence of those crimes and no consequences for the state. The United Nations (UN) reporting mechanisms such as Special Rapporteurships and Universal Periodic Reviews continuously call for action to be taken in the Duvalier case and for the Truth and Justice Commission of 1995 to be reviewed. Yet the Haitian government continuously lies about actions taken or completely dismisses the significance of these recommendations. This is evidenced by the Haitian government's response to the 2016 UN Universal Periodic Review report whereby the government was urged to implement recommendations from Haiti's 1995 Truth and Justice Commission following the violent 3-year military regime. The Haitian government's response captures the attitude of the state regarding memory work, it was as follows:

*Regarding the recommendations of the Truth and Justice Commission, as they relate to the Raboteau trial and that thereafter, victims and executioners coexist in harmony in a relatively lasting social peace, the Government has deemed it unnecessary to stir up the ashes of the past by resuming the trial.<sup>2</sup>*

DDMH's commemorations have, to date, not been subject to much official opposition. Despite there being many people in the public sphere who are known to have profited greatly from the dictatorship, their allegiances lie with the best opportunities rather than an ideology. One of the greatest obstacles lies in the limited opportunities to advocate for memory work because we are constantly confronted with perpetrators and known accomplices. We have built relationships with various international bodies whose protocols require that certain officials be invited to certain events. When we show up and are surrounded by known human rights violators we cannot authentically participate and often simply leave the event. Sometimes there are events we could attend that are hosted at venues owned by perpetrators, other times we are forced to socialize in the same company as those perpetrators.

#### **THE EVENT:**

On April 26th, 1963, Duvalier orchestrated a massacre to remove military officers and personnel that were either in opposition to his rule or occupied a post that he wanted for one of his entourages. Duvalier had received intelligence that an assassination plot was being prepared for his son Jean-Claude. Duvalier knowingly let the plot unfold, risking both of his children's lives, and three bodyguards were killed. With this justification, he unleashes a supposed wrath to remove all military personnel that were deemed problematic. In his explanations, he laid blame on François Benoît, an officer and sharpshooter, and proceeded to try to exterminate his entire family, including his in-laws. Benoît's house was ransacked and burned, seven people inside were killed, including his 18-month-old son was never found and his wife's family was also targeted and nine people were killed, including a baby. Duvalier's henchmen, called *makout*, ran through the capital like a tidal wave and, having been informed prior to the day, *makouts* in other towns and cities followed suit with the list of targets they had. By the end of the day, over 500 people had been killed, arrested, or were never seen again, their fates remaining unknown to this day.

### **3. Commemorative Practices**

DDMH commemorates April 26th with the intention of fostering awareness, not just of the massacre of 1963 but of the dictatorship in general, and to have a designated time and place to remember people who died or disappeared throughout that period of our history. Since we began the commemorations in 2013, we have done religious services, hung banners across the city, posted on social media with stories of the day, created with communities sites of memory, and in 2019, with the support of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR), we hosted a conference on transitional justice and past crimes. Since 2019 however, we have not held an in-person event. Between COVID and the precarious security situation in Haiti, it has not been possible. This year, we were short of human and financial resources to do anything other than post on social media despite the interest from many partners around the country and in the diaspora.

### **APRIL 26TH, 1986**

Jean-Claude Duvalier was ousted in February of 1986. His ousting prompted a series of protests, and by April of the same year, François Benoît was already back in Haiti mobilizing a transition, starting with a commemoration of April 26th. The first commemoration following the fall of the dictatorship was to be a mass at a Catholic church followed by a slow procession to Fort Dimanche. Once the procession of several thousand people arrived, they were met with guards posted around the fort, some kneeling behind 50 caliber machine guns. Some people were chanting, and others were getting agitated and started trying to get the gates opened. François Benoît, speaking into a loudspeaker, attempted to calm the crowd but soon, things escalated. The guards cut the electrical cables over the crowd who dispersed enough to cause a stampede. Two men were caught by the cables and electrocuted but survived thanks to François Benoît who pushed the cables away with a wooden chair.<sup>3</sup> The guards started firing into the crowd, wounding many people, and killing seven.<sup>4</sup> The planning committee called the *Komite Pa Bliye* (or We Won't Forget Committee) was dismantled following the commemoration.

### **APRIL 26TH, 2013**

In 2013, the family of a victim of April 26, 1963 intended to host a mass in remembrance of their father who disappeared on that day. This was something they did every few years but 2013 marked the 50th anniversary of the day and upon hearing this, another victim simply stated "But April 26th does not belong to you. If you do this, you must do it for everyone." The commemoration that took place in 2013 was the first since the first attempt in 1986, and most of the members of the 1986 committee participated in the 2013 event. This time, however, the approach was largely rooted in awareness to shed light on the truths of our past as our younger generations do not know about this period of our history. With this new approach, the organizing committee was made up of the founding members of DDMH, including François Benoît and his wife. Throughout the planning, more people began to volunteer to give their testimonies from that day on different radio stations, share pictures and documents, help with the planning, or send flowers.

The entire month of April, we hosted over 12 radio interviews with people who shared their stories from that day. Most of them admitted to never speaking of the events of the day in the 50 years since they had taken place. Children and grandchildren were finally learning what happened to their parents and grandparents. On April 26th, 2013, with the support of other victims and friends in Haiti and around the world, services were held in three different cities in Haiti and around the world in France, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, Spain, Canada, Puerto Rico, Paraguay, Florida, California, and New York.<sup>5</sup> The event in the capital, the catalyzer, welcomed over 1000 people and featured a wall of pictures of the victims, a banner with the names of known victims, and at the end of the service, the names were read out loud.

### **APRIL 26TH, 2019**

In 2019, we prepared our commemoration to be two simultaneous events welcoming six different schools and about 600 students to view our traveling exhibit and see a production of a play called "Testimony" which presented the duality of the perceptions of the dictatorship where one group representing a younger generation talked about how things were better then, and another group of victims telling them what it was really like through

testimonies of things they lived through. The exhibit is a chronology of the dictatorship on poster boards with pictures and descriptions of events. It also features a few special collections for massacres like April 26th where we have pictures of victims as well as a large banner with the names of all the victims.

We received a pledge from a joint project on transitional justice from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN OHCHR. The funding was intended to cover three simultaneous conferences on April 26th in Port-au-Prince hosted by DDMH, and in Saint Marc and Fort Liberté hosted by two partner organizations. Each event would have a moment of silence in remembrance of all victims of state violence and then there would be panel discussions and testimonies by victims. The funding was not disbursed in time for the events and thus DDMH's members had to foot the bill for the Port-au-Prince event which could not be publicized sufficiently and was not well attended. The events of the two other partner organizations didn't take place until July, when the funds were finally disbursed.

#### **4. Other Commemorative Practices**

During the time of the dictatorship more than 80% of the population were rural peasants. Duvalier's strategic and systematic dispossession of the peasantry is the least talked about abuse of the dictatorship and the most harmful to the economy and to the majority of our population. When we were preparing the strategic plan, we identified a huge gap whereby we did not see peasant associations represented at the workshops or conferences on transitional justice and impunity. We sought them out specifically and their contribution made the plan uniquely inclusive in that we had them in a room with human rights and civil society organizations represented by individuals across all social strata.

DDMH has organized commemorations in different communities across the country, particularly in schools. Most significant of which was a commemoration in 2014 in the southeast of Haiti in a peasant community called Thiotte where in 1964 the community was found to have assisted rebel groups and Duvalier used the occasion to punish the community and seize their lands; 600 people were killed. When DDMH organized the commemoration, we intended to have a march from the public square to the main cemetery and have the exhibit of the dictatorship available in a community center for a week. Most of the community came out for the event and most of the people in attendance never knew why the massacre had occurred. We shared with them the story and after the event the schools kept asking to go to the exhibit and we left it up for the community for a whole month. When the community showed us where a mass grave for victims of the massacre, and we helped them build a tombstone with the date and a short description of the massacre. The community told us they finally felt at peace with the loss of their loved ones.

In another instance, we commemorated a similar massacre where Duvalier punished a community where many rebels were from by killing the families of the rebels who themselves had already been killed. In this town though, there were a lot of light skinned Haitians and when we commemorated that occasion, again with the exhibit and telling the story, people noted that they didn't know that the

light skinned Haitians had also been victims. In the town of Jeremie, we helped the community rehabilitate a small shrine where the names of the victims from the massacre were painted on the walls. The community maintains the site and occasionally flowers are brought and candles lit. They thanked us profusely and said that to them, since the massacre in 1964 there has been a “madichon” or bad luck on the region.

DDMH has three other fixed sites to mark significant events and people. The first is a plaque near a cave in the mountains above the capital where a young rebel, Hector Riobé, was holed up for 3 days trying to fight off the *makouts*. The young man killed himself after the *makouts* released a donkey carrying his naked and beaten mother on its back. The community allowed us to build a small gravestone where we put a plaque with his picture, name, and a description of his incredible story. The other two sites are both graffiti murals, one is of two young men rebels, Louis Drouin and Marcel Numas, who were caught and publicly executed in the national cemetery of Port-au-Prince. Their mural is on the wall of the very cemetery where they were executed and people in the neighborhood have maintained the site by keeping it clean. The final mural is of a woman journalist, Yvonne Hakim Rimpel, who wrote many articles denouncing the dictatorship in its early years. She was arrested and subsequently raped and beaten, then dumped naked in the street. She immediately left Haiti and never came back, but she remains one of the foremost feminist activists in Haiti’s history.

In addition to DDMH, there is a local cultural foundation that has hosted different events like lectures and photo exhibits of the dictatorship, including sponsoring some publications by historians or victims but they have not often commemorated specific dates.

In the Northwest of Haiti, there was a massacre on July 23rd 1987, one year after the fall of the dictatorship, during which 139 peasants were killed. The community and their peasant associations commemorate the day every year (as of 2018) by visiting the tombstone they placed at the site of the mass grave and they resubmit their complaint at the local courthouse demanding justice for the massacre.

Gang violence in the last five years has escalated to an unprecedented degree and resulted in the deaths of many people and the displacement of thousands of people. Throughout the capital and its surrounding areas, there are often banners with a message of farewell from the community for someone who died, often young men. Sometimes, instead of banners, there are murals painted on the walls with pictures of the victims and their birth and death dates; again, these are almost always young men. Without adequate justice, people memorialize the deaths of loved ones as best as they can.

To date, all commemorations of violent acts seen or heard of in Haiti are wholly led by civil society groups and never sponsored officially or otherwise by state entities.

## **5. Challenges and Lessons Learned:**

**Working with international bodies like the UN can be limiting to a human rights organization because of the bureaucracy and delays of these agencies. In the example above of our 2019 commemoration, the delay with promised funds almost irreparably damaged our reputation and relationships to partner**

organizations with whom we had conceived of doing this commemoration. Given the histories of embezzlement and corruption with aid funding in Haiti, there were times when they believed we took the funds for ourselves and lied to them.

There is this pervasive practice of doing things because of protocols that cannot adapt to different realities. International bodies represent collective interests and as such cannot implement programming that is not approved by the local government and approved programming must engage with local public bodies (ie. invitations to events, consultations, etc). Between 2018 and 2019, we worked with the UN to create a national strategic plan for addressing impunity and past crimes. Throughout this project it was insisted we meet with the Office of the Ombudsman (Office du Prot ecteur du Citoyen, OPC) to share the work being done and identify where the OPC could contribute. We pushed back because the OPC as it stands is a symbol of impunity. The director of that office is supposed to be nominated by a committee, but the current director was appointed by the former president, Jovenel Mo se; and the OPC's office is housed in the former residence of a notorious high-ranking Duvalier official known for keeping and torturing people in cells in his own house, which are still accessible today. Despite this, we met with them because it 'checked a box' of protocol and included them in the strategic plan document but they did not react to the document.

Civil society organizations are chronically under-resourced and very often are handling crises and other situations that require immediate attention. This makes it impossible for them to take on a new project, which would be the case with memory work given that we are the only organization solely engaged in memory work that currently exists. The most important thing we have learned is to do what is possible with what is available. Many organizations will not take on memory work because there is no funding, or they don't have the capacity to house such a project, so they wait for that reality to change and in the meantime victims age and die and valuable testimonies are lost. This leads to the second most important lesson, document everything at the first opportunity.

## **6. Best Practices**

In light of these challenges, we learned to adapt and do whatever we could with what we had. We collected testimonies by email, typed up memories from the time, kept a list of names of perpetrators and victims, collected pictures from people we knew and scoured the internet for images and more information. We prepared the traveling exhibit with funds from members and friends when we had no physical space to house it and we created a Facebook page to share the memories we collected. All of this took a lot of time from volunteers but really only cost a few hundred dollars. Whenever and wherever possible we appeal to private sector members and companies to sponsor events like donating cases of water or shirts that we can print on. We also appeal to friends who have relevant resources like a historian who has access to a radio station or artists and singers. With this approach, we produced a radio show that airs every Wednesday and Thursday for two hours called "Vinn Koute" or "Come Listen". The show's jingle was produced by one of the most popular singers in



Haiti, B.I.C, and we have victims or experts come talk about different aspects of the dictatorship. Sometimes it's testimonies, sometimes it's detailed accounts of the impact of the dictatorship on various aspects of our society such as the economic impact of the embezzlement of tens of millions of dollars or the legacies of corruption shaped by the dictatorship. Similarly, the organization's logo was designed by world renowned Haitian master artist Ralph Allen and our murals are all produced by a popular graffiti artist named Jerry.

Haitian society is divided but we have a great capacity for compassion and solidarity. In light of so few resources to do memory work at a higher level, we have found that awareness and building solidarity has been the most effective way for us to continue to collect and share the truth.

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Testimony of Jocelyn David, 2019. DDMH Archive.

*Un autre 26 avril entaché de sang*, Le Nouvelliste, 26 et 27 avril, page. 1-2.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> New York Times, June 15, 1964

<sup>2</sup> Rapport du gouvernement Haïtien pour le comité des droits de l'homme – EPU 2016, pg.25

<sup>3</sup> Testimony of Jocelyn David, 2019. DDMH Archive.

<sup>4</sup> *Un autre 26 avril entaché de sang*, Le Nouvelliste, 26 et 27 avril, page. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Clérié, Philippe. "Une journée pas comme les autres"; Le Nouvelliste, July 17, 2013.



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